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Thieves, thugs, dope dealers ... and bail bondsmen?

Cops say Minneapolis business was a front for a violent crime ring

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They rolled by the name "Beat-Down Posse," or "BDP," and the rogue's gallery of thieves, thugs and swindlers surrounding bail bondsman Joseph Duane Gustafson Jr. was behind a North Minneapolis crime spree as extensive as it was lengthy, police say.

Investigators say the men, under the guise of pursuing bail jumpers, would often raid the homes of people they thought were drug dealers. But former BDP members told police the raids were undertaken to steal drugs, money and even jewelry.

On Thursday, Hennepin County prosecutors said they hoped they had brought the crimes to a halt. In a 14-count criminal complaint, prosecutors charged Gustafson and an alleged top lieutenant, Troy Michael Neuberger, with crimes ranging from drug sales and assault to mortgage fraud.

But the key charge — and the one that could put the men in prison the longest if convicted — is racketeering. The complaint alleges the Beat-Down Posse was a criminal enterprise, and as such, the members could face 20 years in prison and \$1 million fines if found guilty.

"We think they've been committing crimes on the North Side for years," said Hennepin County Attorney Michael Freeman in announcing the charges. "We finally said, 'Enough's enough. It's time to charge one of the Mr. Bigs.' "

Police Chief Timothy Dolan said it was "a big day for the city of Minneapolis."

Gustafson, 36, was arrested Thursday morning, and his bail was set at \$1 million. His first court appearance was scheduled for this morning.

Neuberger, 39, has been in custody since October, when he was charged with second-degree assault. His bail on the new charges was set at \$500,000.

Attorneys for the men could not immediately be reached for comment. Gustafson's father and business partner in Gustafson's Bail Bonds Inc., Joseph Duane Gustafson Sr., declined to comment.

The elder Gustafson, reputed to have been a member of the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club, is named as a participant in some of the alleged criminal activity cataloged in the 21-page criminal complaint, but he was not charged. Asked about that, Freeman would only say the investigation was continuing.

"Stay tuned," he said.

The younger Gustafson was accused of racketeering, making terroristic threats, kidnapping, assault, three counts of selling drugs, two counts of being a prohibited person possessing a gun and four counts of theft by swindling.

Neuberger is accused of racketeering, two counts of assault, kidnapping and making terroristic threats.

Some of the charges in the complaint were filed last year. The new complaint consolidates those cases, alleges further crimes and adds the racketeering claim.

The complaint goes into detail on how BDP conducted its raids. According to the complaint, one witness told police that Gustafson "often decided to conduct these missions at the end of the month, or what he called 'mortgage time' or 'bill time.' Gustafson Sr. would prepare BDP members for these raids by providing mace, transportation and other equipment."

The BDP gang came to refer to the raids as "Hector missions," named so because they would claim to be looking for a real bail jumper whose first name happened to be Hector.

The complaint says both Gustafsons sought to control the drug activity in their part of North Minneapolis, usually by intimidating dealers and forcing them to pay a 10 percent "tax" on their drug sales.

Among the crimes of violence alleged in the complaint was a 2008 assault in which a dealer was lured to a house and then stripped, beaten and held against his will.

The complaint says the man was beaten so badly that his assailants put him in a bathtub so he wouldn't get blood everywhere. He suffered a skull fracture and other injuries.

Gustafson is also accused of engineering a mortgage fraud scheme that netted him or his father more than \$441,000 from 2005 to 2007.

The complaint names several other alleged gang members. Some have been charged previously. The complaint also says there were at least eight unnamed witnesses who provided information on the inner workings of the gang.

"These folks have had a long history in North Minneapolis of terrorizing neighbors with the crimes they commit," said Barb Johnson, president of the Minneapolis City Council and a resident of the neighborhood. "These folks are very slippery. It's just a highly sophisticated group."

State records show Gustafson has used at least five aliases and has two felony convictions. He has served time in prison for auto theft and second-degree assault.

Neuberger has used at least 13 aliases and six birthdays, according to records. His 16 convictions include careless driving, check forgery and robbery. He has served time in prison for robbery and receiving stolen property.

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